DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 183 257 PS 011 229

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TITLE Remarks of Patricia Roberts Harris (Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare) at the White House Conference on Families (November 30, 1979).
INSTITUTION Department of Health , Education, and Welfare, Washington., D.C. Office of the Secretary.
PUB DATE 30 Nov 79
NOTE 14p.

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Family (Sociological Unit); *Family Programs; *Federal Government; *Government Role

ABSTRACT

This document contains the text of the welcoming address given by the Secretary of the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare at the White House Conference on Families. The address emphasizes the importance of the family and delineates the family assistance measures taken by the federal government during the Carter years. (JMB)

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Remarks Of
Patricia Roberts Harris
Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare

At the
White House Conference on Families
November 30, 1979

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I WANT TO EXTEND A WARM WELCOME TO THOSE OF YOU WHO HAVE COME TO WASHINGTON TO PARTICIPATE IN THE WORK OF THE WHITE HOUSE CONFERENCE ON FAMILIES. I CHOSE THE WORD "PARTICIPATE" CAREFULLY, BECAUSE THIS WHITE HOUSE CONFERENCE IS DETERMINED TO LISTEN AND TO LEARN WHAT YOU BELIEVE WE OUGHT TO BE DOING TO STRENGTHEN THE AMERICAN FAMILY.

"SINCE HUMAN BEINGS EMERGED AS A SPECIES," WROTE THE LATE MARGARET MEAD, "THEY HAVE BEEN REARED IN FAMILIES AND HAVE LIVED THEIR LIVES WITHIN THE BOUNDARIES OF GROUPS TO WHOM THEY WERE CONNECTED BY BLOOD OR MARRIAGE. IN MOST HUMAN SOCIETIES -- THESE ARE THE MOST ABIDING AND IMPORTANT RELATIONSHIPS PEOPLE EVER HAVE."

FOR MOST OF US, THAT ASSESSMENT IS STILL TRUE. OUR FAMILIES ARE OUR LINK TO THE PAST, JUST AS OUR CHILDREN GIVE US A STAKE IN THE FUTURE. DURING OUR LIFETIMES, OUR FAMILIES OFFER SUPPORT AND LOVE IN GOOD TIMES AND BAD. ONE SOCIOLOGIST SUMS IT UP WELL WHEN HE CALLS THE FAMILY "A HAVEN IN A HEARTLESS WORLD."

BUT IN RECENT TIMES MANY HAVE COME TO BELIEVE THAT THE AMERICAN FAMILY IS ENDANGERED. FAMILY LIFE IS SAID TO BE IN CRISIS. THE MOST ENDURING OF SOCIAL INSTITUTIONS IS REPORTED TO BE THREATENED BY A RAPIDLY CHANGING SOCIETY.

WE OUGHT TO KEEP THE PICTURE IN PERSPECTIVE. THE SHELVES OF OUR LIBRARIES A GENERATION AGO WERE FILLED WITH AN EQUAL NUMBER OF BOOKS PROCLAIMING A CRISIS IN FAMILY PATTERNS. SOCIAL HISTORIANS IN THE LAST CENTURY WERE DEEPLY CONCERNED THAT THE INDUSTRIALIZATION AND URBANIZATION OF AMERICA WOULD TEAR APART FAMILY UNITY. I SUSPECT CONCERN OVER THE POSSIBLE DISINTEGRATION OF THE FAMILY HAS BEEN PRESENT IN EVERY SOCIETY THROUGHOUT THE HISTORY OF CIVILIZATION. I AM SURE THAT ADAM AND EVE FIRST QUESTIONED THE FUTURE OF THE FAMILY WHEN CAIN SLEW ABEL. HOWEVER, THE FAMILY SURVIVED.

HOWEVER, I BELIEVE THE PRESENT CHALLENGE IS BOTH REAL AND SERIOUS. AT THE SAME TIME, I AM CONFIDENT THAT THE FAMILY -- THE MOST DURABLE OF INSTITUTIONS -- WILL SURVIVE THE TESTS OF TODAY. I AM CONFIDENT PARTLY BECAUSE I KNOW THAT YOU IN THIS ROOM AND MILLIONS LIKE YOU ACROSS THE COUNTRY ARE READY TO HELP.

I AM CONFIDENT BECAUSE THE ADMINISTRATION -- BEGINNING WITH THE PRESIDENT AND THE FIRST LADY -- IS DEEPLY COMMITTED TO THE WORK OF THE CONFERENCE AND THE CONCERNS OF THE FAMILY. AND YOU WHO KNOW THIS FIRST FAMILY KNOW THEIR COMMITMENT IS DEEPLY ROOTED AND NOT SOMETHING JUST RECENTLY DEVELOPED. AS SECRETARY OF HEW, I SHARE THEIR COMMITMENT, AND IN THE MONTHS AHEAD I WILL DO EVERYTHING I CAN TO SEE THAT HEW SUPPORTS YOUR EFFORTS AND BECOMES MORE SENSITIVE TO WAYS IN WHICH WE CAN ASSIST THE AMERICAN FAMILY.

A RECENT STUDY COMPLETED AT GEORGE WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY IDENTIFIED 331 DIFFERENT DOMESTIC ASSISTANCE PROGRAMS THAT AFFECT THE FAMILY IN ONE WAY OR ANOTHER. RESEARCHERS HAD A MUCH MORE DIFFICULT TIME, HOWEVER, DETERMINING JUST HOW THESE PROGRAMS WORKED AND WHETHER IN THE AGGREGATE THEY SERVED TO STRENGTHEN OR WEAKEN THE FAMILY IN OUR SOCIETY.

SOON AFTER TAKING OFFICE, PRESIDENT CARTER DIRECTED THE ADMINISTRATION TO TAKE STOCK OF THE VARIOUS FEDERAL PROGRAMS WHICH AFFECT FAMILIES, AND I ASSURE YOU THAT HIS DIRECTIVE IS BEING HEEDED AT HEW AND ACROSS THE ADMINISTRATION.

IN EVERY SENSE THE CARTER YEARS HAVE BEEN GOOD YEARS FOR THE CONCERNS OF FAMILIES. WE HAVE ENROLLED AN ADDITIONAL 68,000 PRESCHOOL CHILDREN FROM LOW-INCOME HOMES BY EXPANDING EXISTING HEAD START CENTERS AND BY CREATING NEW ONES IN OVER 100 COMMUNITIES NOT SERVED PREVIOUSLY BY HEAD START.

WE HAVE REFORMED THE FOOD STAMP PROGRAM, MAKING IT MORE AVAILABLE FOR POOR FAMILIES. AS A RESULT OF THE REFORMS, THE NUMBER OF PROGRAM PARTICIPANTS HAS RISEN 3 MILLION OR FULLY 20 PERCENT TO A TOTAL OF EIGHTEEN AND ONE HALF MILLION PEOPLE, ALL OF WHOM ARE NEEDY.

WE HAVE ENACTED NEW LAWS AND REGULATIONS TO ENCOURAGE PART-TIME EMPLOYMENT AND FLEXIBLE TIME SCHEDULES, BOTH OF WHICH WILL PERMIT EMPLOYEES TO ADJUST THEIR WORKDAY TO FAMILY RESPONSIBILITIES AS WELL AS TO COMBAT DISCRIMINATION IN EMPLOYMENT BECAUSE OF PREGNANCY.

WE HAVE SUPPORTED EXTENSION OF THE CHILD ABUSE ACT, WHICH ESTABLISHES THE FOCAL POINT FOR CHILD ABUSE ACTIVITIES

WITHIN THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT, AND WE HAVE ADDED ADDITIONAL FUNDS TO OUR BUDGET FOR PROGRAMS TO COMBAT SEXUAL ABUSE AND SEXUAL EXPLOITATION.

WE HAVE TAKEN IMPORTANT STEPS TO COORDINATE FEDERAL PROGRAMS ON DOMESTIC VIOLENCE, AND LOOK TO AN EXPANSION OF THESE ACTIVITIES IN THE FUTURE.

WE HAVE GREATLY INCREASED FUNDING FOR SOCIAL SERVICES, FOR HEALTH SERVICES, FOR HOUSING AND FOR EDUCATION.

WE ARE IMPLEMENTING A NEW ADOPTION OPPORTUNITIES PROGRAM, DESIGNED TO INCREASE THE CHANCES OF FINDING ADOPTIVE HOMES FOR OLDER, MINORITY AND OTHER "SPECIAL NEEDS" FOSTER CHILDREN. THE PROGRAM HAS ALREADY AWARDED OVER $4 MILLION FOR A SERIES OF PROJECTS TO ENCOURAGE ADOPTION OF CHILDREN WHO HAVE SPENT MANY YEARS IN FOSTER CARE.

WE ARE SHEPHERDING NEW CHILD WELFARE LEGISLATION THROUGH THE CONGRESS, FINAL PASSAGE OF WHICH IS EXPECTED VERY SHORTLY. ONCE ENACTED, THE LAW WILL MORE THAN DOUBLE THE AMOUNT OF MONEY GIVEN TO THE STATES EACH YEAR FOR CHILD AND FAMILY SERVICES.

FURTHERMORE, THE PRESIDENT PROPOSED TO THE CONGRESS THE CHILD HEALTH ASSURANCE PROGRAM (CHAP) WHICH IS DESIGNED TO IMPROVE HEALTH CARE FOR CHILDREN. CHAP IS AN IMPORTANT STEP

TOWARD OUR GOAL OF ASSURING THAT NEEDY CHILDREN RECEIVE THE MEDICAL AND MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES NECESSARY TO ENABLE THEM TO LEAD HEALTHY AND PRODUCTIVE LIVES.

RECOGNIZING THAT ONE FAMILY IN TEN AND ONE CHILD IN SIX LIVES IN POVERTY, THE PRESIDENT HAS SUBMITTED TO THE CONGRESS TWO COMPANION PROPOSALS DESIGNED TO BRING LONG OVERDUE IMPROVEMENTS IN THE AREAS OF WELFARE AND EMPLOYMENT AND TRAINING PROGRAMS.

THE WELFARE REFORM PROPOSAL WOULD ESTABLISH FOR THE FIRST TIME A NATIONAL MINIMUM WELFARE STANDARD AT 65 PERCENT OF THE POVERTY LINE, REDUCING THE DISPARITY IN THE WAY POOR FAMILIES ARE TREATED STATE TO STATE. ADDITIONALLY, THE REFORMS WOULD REQUIRE COVERAGE OF TWO PARENT FAMILIES. THIS HAS BEEN OUR OPTION SINCE 1961 -- BUT ONLY 27 STATES HAVE CHOSEN TO DO SO.

THE PRESIDENT ALSO PROPOSED A NATIONAL HEALTH PLAN WHICH IS NOW BEFORE THE CONGRESS. CLEARLY THE TIME HAS COME FOR THIS NATION TO EXPAND THE HEALTH CARE SYSTEM TO COVER THE MOST VULNERABLE IN OUR SOCIETY. THE PRESIDENT'S PLAN WOULD SUBSTANTIALLY REDUCE THE FINANCIAL INSECURITY FELT BY FAMILIES BY PROVIDING CATASTROPHIC COVERAGE TO ALL AMERICANS -- COVERAGE WHICH 85 PERCENT LACK TODAY -- AND BY OFFERING COMPREHENSIVE CARE TO 15 MILLION LOW-INCOME PEOPLE.

TAKEN TOGETHER -- THE SPECIFIC ADMINISTRATIVE CHANGES, THE PROGRAM REFORMS, THE BUDGET INCREASES, AND THE BROAD GAUGE LEGISLATIVE PROPOSALS -- AMOUNT TO A SOLID RECORD OF COMMITMENT AND SUPPORT FOR THE AMERICAN FAMILY. IT'S A RECORD WE ALL CAN BE PROUD OF AND SUPPORT IN THE MONTHS AHEAD.

IN ADDITION, THIS PAST MONTH, THE PRESIDENT ANNOUNCED THE FORMATION OF A NEW OFFICE ON FAMILIES. THIS MARKS THE FIRST TIME THAT THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT HAS MOVED TO CREATE AN OFFICE SPECIFICALLY DEVOTED TO THE FAMILY.

THIS NEW OFFICE WILL HAVE MAJOR RESPONSIBILITIES FOR MAKING SURE THAT THE RECOMMENDATIONS OF THIS CONFERENCE ARE ACTED UPON. FURTHERMORE, THE NEW OFFICE WILL COORDINATE HEW ACTIVITIES AND PROGRAMS AFFECTING FAMILIES, AND ACT AS A CLEARINGHOUSE FOR INFORMATION AND RESEARCH ABOUT FAMILIES. THE OFFICE WILL ALSO PROVIDE A FOCAL POINT FOR THE DEVELOPMENT AND COORDINATION OF ALL POLICIES, LEGISLATION AND PROGRAMS WHICH AFFECT FAMILIES, AND I BELIEVE THAT IS A LONG OVERDUE DEVELOPMENT IN WASHINGTON.

BEYOND A DOUBT, WE HAVE MADE PROGRESS IN THE LAST 3 YEARS FOR THE AMERICAN FAMILY AND THE MOMENTUM IS BUILDING. YOUR CHALLENGE NOW IS TO SUSTAIN THAT MOMENTUM; TO HELP GUIDE GOVERNMENT POLICIES INTO NEW AREAS; TO WRESTLE WITH THE DIFFICULT QUESTIONS AND PROBLEMS WHICH LIE AHEAD.

THE AVAILABILITY OF DAY CARE SERVICES IS AN EXAMPLE. ALTHOUGH FULL DAY CARE IS OFTEN CITED AS A BOON TO WORKING MOTHERS, IT SHOULD NOT BE THE ONLY OPTION AVAILABLE FOR PARENTS WHO WORK WHILE THEIR CHILDREN ARE YOUNG. AN INCREASE IN THE AVAILABILITY OF PART-TIME JOBS OR MORE OPPORTUNITIES FOR FLEXITIME ARRANGEMENTS FOR BOTH PARENTS MIGHT ALLOW THEM MORE TIME WITH THEIR CHILDREN AND THEREBY STRENGTHEN FAMILIES.

WE NEED TO LOOK AT EMPLOYMENT PRACTICES, TRANSPORTATION SERVICES, DAY CARE ARRANGEMENTS, TAX POLICIES AND OTHER FACTORS WHICH HAVE AN IMPACT ON FAMILY LIFE TODAY.

IT IS A LARGE AND COMPLICATED SUBJECT, AND IT WILL REQUIRE OUR BEST EFFORTS IF WE TRULY CARE ABOUT PRESERVING THE QUALITY OF FAMILY LIFE. GOVERNMENT POLICIES UNAVOIDABLY AFFECT FAMILIES, AND WE MUST HELP GUARANTEE THAT THEIR IMPACT IS POSITIVE.

THE CARTER ADMINISTRATION IS DETERMINED TO LEAVE NO STONE UNTURNED AS WE EVALUATE WHAT GOVERNMENT AND THE PRIVATE SECTOR DO TO HELP OR HARM FAMILY LIFE.

THE WHITE HOUSE CONFERENCE ON FAMILIES SYMBOLIZES THAT DETERMINATION. IN MEETINGS AND HEARINGS ACROSS THE COUNTRY IN THE COMING MONTHS, THE CONFERENCE WILL HELP TO BUILD A NATIONAL AGENDA FOR ACTION FOR THE AMERICAN FAMILIES. IT WILL ENABLE INDIVIDUALS AND REPRESENTATIVES OF COMMUNITY GROUPS TO SPEAK OUT FRANKLY ABOUT GOVERNMENT POLICIES IN AREAS LIKE HOUSING AND EMPLOYMENT AND HEALTH -- TO REPORT ON WAYS IN WHICH THOSE POLICIES HELP, HINDER OR NEGLECT THE INSTITUTION OF FAMILY LIFE.

ALL OF THESE ACTIVITIES WILL LEAD UP TO THREE NATIONAL WHITE HOUSE CONFERENCES ON FAMILIES TO BE HELD NEXT SUMMER IN BALTIMORE, MINNEAPOLIS AND LOS ANGELES. I AM PLEASED THAT RATHER THAN HOLDING A SINGLE EVENT IN WASHINGTON, THE CONFERENCE HAS DECIDED TO MAKE EVERY EFFORT TO SEEK OUT CONCERNED CITIZENS WHO REPRESENT THE AMAZING DIVERSITY OF THE AMERICAN FAMILY. I KNOW THIS WILL GENERATE THE WIDEST POSSIBLE DISCUSSION IN ALL

REGIONS OF THE COUNTRY AMONG ALL ETHNIC, RACIAL, SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC GROUPS, AND WILL LEAD TO THE KIND OF CREATIVE THINKING WE ALL WILL NEED IF WE ARE ULTIMATELY TO SUCCEED AT OUR IMPORTANT WORK.

I WANT TO UNDERSCORE THAT LAST POINT. OFFICIAL WASHINGTON IS SOMETIMES PRONE TO CYNICAL AND JADED REACTIONS TO THE WORKINGS OF WHITE HOUSE CONFERENCES. THIS CONFERENCE, I THINK, WILL PROVE AN EXCEPTION TO THAT RESPONSE.

FEW DOUBT THE IMPORTANCE AND SIGNIFICANCE OF YOUR WORK, FOR WHAT YOU HAVE SET OUT TO DO TOUCHES THE VERY CORNERSTONE OF OUR SOCIETY. FOR IN A VERY REAL WAY AMERICA'S STRENGTH, VITALITY AND WELL BEING IS LINKED TO THE STRENGTH, VITALITY AND WELL BEING OF THE AMERICAN FAMILY. IN STRENGTHENING THE FAMILY WE STRENGTHEN AMERICA ITSELF.

IN CLOSING I WOULD LIKE TO LEAVE YOU WITH ONE OBSERVATION ABOUT THE INTRINSIC NATURE OF THE FAMILY.

LAST WEEK WE OBSERVED THE THANKSGIVING HOLIDAY, A TIME, ONE OBSERVER WROTE, "WHEN WE CELEBRATE BRINGING IN THE FAMILY AS IF IT WERE OUR HARVEST."

IN A NEWSPAPER COLUMN THE DAY BEFORE THANKSGIVING, ELLEN GOODMAN NOTED THAT ALTHOUGH OUR ERA PRIDES ITSELF ON FLEXIBILITY AND FREEDOM OF CHOICE, THE REMARKABLE THING ABOUT FAMILIES IS THAT THEY DON'T CHOOSE EACH OTHER, BUT THEY STILL ENDURE.

"EVEN THOSE WHO FEUD ACKNOWLEDGE A BOND, AND THOSE WHO ARGUE ABOUT EVERTHING FROM POLITICS TO SPORTS FIND A WAY TO SHARE THE PAIN," SHE WROTE. "COMMUNES AND COMMUNITIES THAT WE HAVE BUILT TO LAST, WITH ALMOST CALCULATING CAUTIOUSNESS, FALL. BUT THE FAMILIES THAT GROW WITH ALL THE ECCENTRICITIES OF NATURE, WITH PEOPLE WHO HAVE ONLY EACH OTHER IN COMMON, SURVIVE."

I THINK THIS HOLDS TRUE WHETHER THE FAMILY IN QUESTION IS THE SO-CALLED MODEL FAMILY OF TWO PARENTS AND TWO CHILDREN IN SUBURBIA OR THE SINGLE PARENT FAMILY STRUGGLING TO MAKE ENDS MEET. FOR WHATEVER THE ECONOMIC CONDITIONS OR PERSONAL CIRCUMSTANCES MAY BE -- AND THEY VARY TREMENDOUSLY IN THIS GREAT AND DIVERSE COUNTRY -- THE COMMON DENOMINATOR IS THAT SPECIAL HUMAN BOND OF LOVE THAT UNIFIES THE FAMILY AND

IN TURN THE SOCIETY ITSELF. IT IS AT ONCE THE REASON THERE ARE FAMILIES AND THE REASON THE FAMILIES ENDURE.

SO GO FORTH, WITH THE KNOWLEDGE THAT YOU HAVE OUR FULL SUPPORT IN THE IMPORTANT WORK YOU DO.

THANK YOU.

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